

Sigmund Freud and King Tutankhamun

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Sigmund Freud was a collector of antiquities and followed, with great interest, the archeological discoveries of his day including the discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922. In 1931 he wrote to a friend, "I have sacrificed a great deal for my collection of Greek, Roman and Egyptian antiquities, and actually have read more archeology than psychology" (Gay, 1989, p. 16). In fact, Freud's office was a veritable museum of antiquities. His library was filled with books on archeology and among them was his three-volume set of Howard Carter's *The Tomb of Tut-Ankh-amen: Discovered by the Late Earl of Carnarvon and Howard Carter*. The Tutankhamun exhibit, at the Pacific Science Center in Seattle, from May 24th 2012 through January 6th 2013, gives us the opportunity to imagine how Freud would have viewed it, if he'd had the opportunity to see the original artifacts from the boy-king's tomb.

Freud and Archeology

Though it is common knowledge for us today, the notion that our early childhood experiences influence our adult personality was startling news to the world when Freud proposed it in the late 1800s. But Freud saw more than that. He also saw how the developments in ancient history and prehistory influence the structure of modern civilization as well. He also observed the way in which personal experiences have, throughout history, found expression in ancient myths, rituals and social structure.

Freud was born in 1856 and throughout his childhood and adolescence Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was revolutionizing science and modern life. In Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871) he speculated on the evolution of Homo sapiens as a species and also on the evolution of culture. It was a set of ideas that captured the imagination of the young Sigmund Freud and soon he was immersed in the writings of Darwin, Haeckel and the other evolutionary biologists. At the university, Freud thought seriously about studying a combined major in zoology and philosophy, which echoed Darwin's interest in the evolution of man and the evolution of culture. Freud changed his major to study medicine and then neurology, but he was not only interested in helping his patients but also in understanding them and understanding how they got to be the way they were.

Through dream analysis Freud discovered that dreams are not simply the random electrical firing of neurons in the brain and also not to be understood in some formulaic manner but rather are unconscious productions whose meanings can be discerned if they

are not looked at literally as plans or as predictions of the future but as constellations of metaphors describing the current status of the psyche, its desires and its conflicts.

As his psychoanalytic work continued, Freud discovered a remarkable resemblance between the dreams of individuals and the myths of cultures. Looked at literally and concretely none of them made sense. Looked at figuratively and metaphorically they were full of meaning – personal meaning and cultural meaning. And not only that, but dreams and myths often seemed to be using a common set of metaphors - almost like universal symbols - and had similar themes as well. It was an astonishing discovery and while continuing to see his patients, he began to speculate on the origin of symbols and recurring psychological dynamics such as falling in love with one parent, entering a rivalry with the other parent, fear of injury as punishment for one's desires, sibling rivalry, self-reproaches for prohibited wishes, and so on. When he discovered in his self analysis his ardent love for his mother in early childhood along with his bitter jealousy of his father, he saw it as a common human dynamic, recognized it as a familiar motif in ancient myths and named it the Oedipus Complex after the Greek myth of Oedipus Rex who, unwittingly, killed his father and married his mother.

But ancient history was not a single moment when everything was different from the way it is now. No, culture evolves and in 1913 Freud wrote *Totem and Taboo* in which he elaborated on Darwin's speculations about cultural evolution drawing on his psychoanalytic experience. He was basically saying that by analyzing the development of the individual he was gleaning clues as to the cultural evolution of all humanity.

Freud wrote, "I believe that a large part of the mythological view of the world, which extends a long way into the most modern religions, is nothing but psychology projected into the external world" (Freud, 1901, p. 258). So while the problems and challenges of childhood find expression in adult personalities and personal problems, they also get projected into myths that then shape cultures, which in turn shape the childhoods of subsequent generations.

But even beyond all that, Freud saw psychoanalysis itself, as a kind of archeological excavation, in which fragments of dreams and memories are carefully unearthed, that is, made conscious, before being reconstructed into a story that gives new meaning to life and new understanding to symptomatic behavior. And sometimes, through that understanding, the reconstructed story then takes the place of the symptom. To analyze a patient means going on an expedition, gathering the fragmentary dreams and memories and reconstructing the past - not changing the past in the past but reconstructing the way the patient views his/her past in the present.

Freud and Ancient Egypt

Freud studied Egyptology in books by E. A. Wallis Budge, James Breasted, Howard Carter and many others. His personal antiquities collection included over two thousand pieces. Of these, 67 appear in a catalogue of Freud's antiquities and of those 28 are Egyptian (Gay, 1989). So why was Freud so fascinated with ancient Egypt? Just one word - death.

Freud had discovered in his clinical work that psychological troubles were often alleviated when he could help a patient to talk about what was difficult to talk about, uncover what had been covered by repression, and thereby make the unconscious conscious. And while there are many things that get repressed, Freud named the three great taboos, which are often subject to repression, as sex, money and death. Returning now to Ancient Egypt Freud would say, “No other people of antiquity did so much as the Egyptians to deny death or took such pains to make existence in the next world possible” (Freud, 1939, p. 19-20).

Freud was also fascinated by the Egyptian pantheon of the gods that consolidated over time until Akhenaten, who ruled from 1353 – 1336 BCE, introduced the Aten religion, which offered for the first time in history a monotheistic religion. Akhenaten also did away with myths, magic and sorcery. He represented the sun-god not in an animal or human form but as a simple disc with rays emanating out terminating in stylized human hands. Akhenaten also made no mention of Osiris, the God of the Dead, or of the Kingdom of the Dead. After thousands of years of frantically denying the finality of death Akhenaten, led his people to face death with fewer illusions than ever before. It was an extraordinary feat in history that captured the imagination of Sigmund Freud. And while the religion died with Akhenaten after only 17 years, Freud theorized that it became the seed that later gave rise to the monotheism of the Jewish religion (Freud, 1938). When Akhenaten died in 1336 B.C.E., it was his nine-year-old son that ascended to the throne – King Tutankhamun.

Freud and Tutankhamun

Freud said the archeologist is always involved in reconstruction based on what has survived and what has been found. In psychoanalysis, however, the analyst has the repository of the unconscious, the transference and the repetitions of reactions in the here and now which date back to early infancy affording the opportunity of uncovering the early childhood trauma in a relatively complete and intact form. Describing this circumstance Freud wrote, **“Here [in psychoanalysis] we are regularly met by a situation which with the archeological object occurs only in such rare circumstances as those of Pompeii or of the tomb of Tut’ankhamun. All of the essentials are preserved [in the unconscious]; even things that seem completely forgotten are present somehow and somewhere, and have merely been buried and made inaccessible to the subject”** (Freud, 1939, p. 260).

For Freud infancy is the 'prehistory' of the person and ancient history is the 'childhood' of mankind. Archeological excavation is a metaphor for psychoanalysis in the pursuit of self-knowledge. Removing the layers of sediment that conceal the ancient artifacts is like removing the repression in order to reveal the forbidden desires and painful traumas residing just beneath the surface of consciousness. Archeological artifacts are like the dreams, fantasies and fragmentary memories, which must be reconstructed to make sense of the past in the present. Ancient Egypt epitomized the denial of death and Akhenaten epitomized the visionary King who was the first to face death for what it is and to do so with fewer illusions than anyone ever before. And finally, the discovery of the

completely intact Tomb of Akhnaten's son, King Tutankhamun, became for Freud a metaphor of the fully recovered memory disinterred from the sands of amnesia, negation, denial and distortion.

The magnificent exhibit, **Tutankhamun: The Golden King and the Great Pharaohs**, will be at the Pacific Science Center in Seattle from May 24th 2012 through January 6th 2013. It includes over 100 authentic ancient Egyptian artifacts including original items from King Tutankhamun's tomb such as the ten-foot quartzite statue of the boy king. But it also includes artifacts from the Golden Age of the Pharaohs. These artifacts span a period of two thousand years, the earliest of which are as much as five thousand years old. In this exhibit we see the ancient Egyptian focus on death and their attempts to conquer it. We also see the enormous bust of King Tutankhamun's father - Akhnaten. I have no doubt that Sigmund Freud, who died in 1939, would have loved seeing this exhibit!

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